

VZCZCXRO7370  
PP RUEHBI RUEHCI  
DE RUEHLM #0445/01 0810458  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 220458Z MAR 06  
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2875  
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9031  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 5920  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 3956  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2896  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9400  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA PRIORITY 0149  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6464  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4403  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000445

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: GROWING PAINS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

REF: COLOMBO 254

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a March 14-16 trip to Maldives, poloff met government officials, political party leaders, and civil society representatives, all of whom expressed commitment to democratic reform but worry about its pace and implementation. All interlocutors responded positively to the March 9 release of the 2005 Country Report on Human Rights Practices (HRR) and requested continued USG engagement and assistance in democracy-building. Government officials were hopeful that democratization would move forward, while many in the opposition remained deeply suspicious whether the government would ever deliver on its commitments to reform. Rifts within the government and within the opposition, as well as mistrust between the two sides, have limited the speed and efficacy of reforms. Nevertheless, democratization seems to be moving in the right direction, albeit glacially. End summary.

-----  
DEMOCRATIZATION:  
VIEWS FROM THE "NEW MALDIVES"  
-----

¶2. (C) During a March 14-16 trip to Maldives, poloff spoke with government officials, opposition leaders, and civil society representatives to gauge the status of the reform process. Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed acknowledged common goals with moderates in the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), and assessed that when the MDP stops dwelling on the governing regime's past failings, the party could win over the center and appeal to a broader voter base. Indeed, he implied if that were the case, he himself would support the MDP. Nevertheless, he said, extremist elements in the MDP hinder reform through anti-Gayoom rhetoric and disengagement with the process.

¶3. (C) Shaheed welcomed the State Department's 2005 Human Rights Report (HRR) and said it was important for the international community to maintain scrutiny over the reform process. (Note: Shaheed said much the same to the Maldivian public in a March 12 press release. End note.) In the meeting with poloff, Shaheed acknowledged his government's areas for improvement and promised to forge ahead in ensuring human rights and strengthening democratic institutions. He said that since the president has been in power for 28 years and now leads the governing Dhivehi Rayyathunge Party (DRP),

it is easy for the opposition to level charges of insincerity in the reform agenda. However, Shaheed said, he gained insight into Gayoom's mind when he worked as his speechwriter, and he trusts Gayoom is genuinely committed to reform. Shaheed added that the government's "Reform Roadmap," complete with a timeline and verifiable benchmarks, will be released by the end of March.

14. (C) Shaheed highlighted the rifts between the reform-minded cabinet ministers and the "Old Maldives," noting that he himself speaks Dhivehi poorly, can only read and write it at a rudimentary level, and is ignorant of the "Court Arabic" that distinguishes many of President Gayoom's closest advisors in the old guard. Shaheed's major concern is that Gayoom is a weak leader susceptible to anti-reformist lobbies in his own camp. Discussing the "Old Maldives," Shaheed also noted that police chief Adam Zahir may be undermining the reform process. Shaheed noted the importance of training the police in democratic principles and creating a space for them in the new, open society Maldives is trying to build.

15. (C) In a separate meeting, Government Spokesman Mohamed Hussain Sharif confirmed opposition press reports that two civil servants had been fired for their affiliation with the MDP. Sharif said the employees in question had announced support for an MDP press statement that challenged the government's legitimacy, an act that he said automatically disqualified them from government service. Noting the possibility that such acts could be interpreted as stifling political dissent, poloff suggested a civil service bill clarifying the rights and responsibilities of government employees. Poloff raised the same concern in a separate

COLOMBO 00000445 002 OF 003

meeting with Attorney General Hassan Saeed, who said a private member from the government's DRP had introduced civil service legislation, which was now under discussion in committee. (Note: An MDP MP told us that the committee formed to discuss the proposed civil service legislation has not been meeting. End note.)

-----  
DEBATE ON NEW LEGISLATION UNDER WAY  
-----

16. (C) In addition to the draft civil service legislation, the government introduced several reform bills currently pending before parliament, including one codifying the Maldives Human Rights Commission (MHRC), four on press freedom, a police powers act, and a security services act. The last two will cite rights and responsibilities of police and military separately. The reform bills will be discussed in turn, and Attorney General Hassan Saeed told poloff that a new penal code, drafted in consultation with an American law professor, will be introduced to parliament within two weeks. Saeed expressed confidence that the reform bills, including the penal code, will be passed in parliament, and added that until they could be legislatively implemented, he would seek presidential decrees to ensure the bills' substance would be in force. MHRC commissioners Wahid and Saleem told poloff that the new MHRC bill will make the body compliant with UN guidelines and offer independent oversight, assuaging concerns that caused the chair and two commissioners to resign in August, leaving the MHRC unable to function. (Note: The bill has been referred to a committee and is under debate. End note.)

-----  
CHALLENGES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY  
-----

17. (C) In a March 15 meeting with poloff, Fathimath Shaheeda of the pro-opposition Minivan Radio explained that since the radio station has not been permitted to register in Maldives, she records her news show, sends it as an audio file to be

edited in Colombo, and then forwards it from Colombo to Europe, from where it is broadcast over the internet. In addition to technical challenges, Shaheeda said she has been slandered by pro-government internet sites and media. NGOs, too, have faced difficulties. In a separate meeting with Poloff that same day, Hindha Ismail described her unsuccessful attempts to register an NGO called the Detainee Network, a forum for families of detainees to share information with one another and with the international community through daily e-mail updates. Ismail said she and a colleague have attempted to register the NGO several times in the past year, but were repeatedly denied, sometimes because of quibbles as minor as grammar corrections. Ismail also alleged that her co-founder, an employee at the Justice Ministry, was threatened with denial of government-funded medical care if she did not remove her name from the petition to register the Detainee Network. While Ismail's colleague withdrew her name, Ismail is still attempting to register the organization on her own. (Note: We have also received unsubstantiated reports that other NGO founders perceived as pro-opposition have been denied registration. End note.)

-----  
OPPOSITION MDP CONTINUES TO OPPOSE,  
BUT SOME FIND POINTS OF AGREEMENT  
-----

18. (C) Poloff met with MDP chair Mohamed Nasheed, who remains under house arrest pending trial on charges of sedition and terrorism, as well as separately with several other MDP representatives. All opposition interlocutors welcomed the HRR and asked for continued international oversight of the reform process. Poloff urged MDP representatives to shift the debate from personality, i.e. anti-Gayoom propaganda, to process, focusing on a policy platform. MDP President and MP Ibrahim Ismail said the government had failed to release funds in the federal budget reserved for political parties, disadvantaging the MDP. He also said the MDP plans to release a platform outlining structural reforms and socio-economic policies within two weeks, aiming to publish it before the government's Reform

COLOMBO 00000445 003 OF 003

Roadmap. Ismail and several other MDP MPs said they shared aims with the New Maldives group and felt the need for greater dialogue with the government. However, others in the opposition, including Nasheed and Ibrahim Zaki, claimed they saw no indications the government was committed to reforms.

-----  
ADALATH AND THE ISLAMIC DEMOCRATIC PARTY:  
MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY?  
-----

19. (C) The Adalath, or Justice Party, is widely perceived as espousing an orthodox Muslim line generally opposed to the broad democratic principles the New Maldives cabinet ministers and the MDP champion. Poloff tried several times to contact a representative of Adalath, but no one was available to meet. Adalath does not appear to have a strong following within Maldives, and many have criticized its fundamentalist stance on issues such as women's rights. Poloff met with Umar Naseer, the founder of the Islamic Democratic Party (IDP), the last to register following the MDP, DRP, and Adalath. (Note: Naseer, a former National Security Service official, is cited as a perpetrator of torture in one victim's asylum testimony for the UN. End note.) Naseer, a successful businessman, said he finances the IDP fully himself, also adding that the government has not released the funds earmarked for political parties. Naseer and a group of about seven others are steering the IDP, with a party leadership election due in about one year. Naseer said his party aims to appeal to centrist voters unsatisfied with both the government and the MDP, noting "Ninety-five percent of the population dislike Gayoom, but most don't want a street over-throw (of the government)."

Naseer said the IDP would limit nepotism and corruption and champion conservative social values, but offered no specifics as to how his party is different from the government's DRP.

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

¶10. (C) There appears to be genuine commitment to reform across both sides of the aisle, but the government and the opposition each face impediments. The DRP's credibility as an engine of reform suffers from having Gayoom, president for the last 28 years, at the helm of the party as well as of the nation. In addition, the old guard, including police chief Adam Zahir, are taking a strong anti-reform stance, exerting pressure on the President to maintain the status quo. The MDP, on the other hand, is attempting to make the difficult transition from activist group to political party. The party has made some progress into this uncharted new territory, holding a party congress in December to elect its leadership and promote internal party democracy. Beyond that, however, the party has not articulated a set of policies-- other than "Gayoom must go"-- that offers citizens a clear idea of what it can deliver.

¶11. (C) Comment cont'd: As AG Saeed has repeatedly pointed out to emboffs, "Democracy is more than just elections." The fate of the legislation pending before Majlis will be vital in determining the manner in which Maldives shifts from autocracy to democracy. The new bills, in conjunction with the new penal code, could ensure greater civil and political rights for all Maldivians. However, if the discussions become mired in partisan bickering, as has been the case in the constitutional assembly, there is a danger the process will simply stagnate. MPs from both parties have been guilty of playing to the gallery at the expense of substantive debate. We will continue to urge all parties to focus on the issues and serve the best interests of the constituents by moving the reform process forward. Moreover, Maldives is a place where relatively small amounts of democracy and human rights funding can make a difference as this pro-Western moderate Muslim nation inches down the road towards greater democracy and respect for human rights. End comment.

ENTWISTLE